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When Your Parents Are Divorced

When Your Parents are Divorced, Visiting Day can be the Worst Day of the Summer.

Twelve-year-old Sara sat in my office crying. She was leaving for sleep away camp and was really excited, with one major concern – Visiting Day.

In light of the increase in divorced families, some camps today have created an alternate weekend policy, encouraging divorced parents in conflict to visit on separate weekends. But for many campers of divorced parents, Visiting Day remains a stressful and anxiety-ridden one. Sara’s parents agreed to this but she still felt extremely upset. She knew that just seeing all the intact families and even some “Brady Bunch families” would make her sad. It seemed to be a sadness that wouldn’t go away.

Sara is not alone with these feelings. Visiting Day for campers whose parents are in high conflict divorces is dreaded. As a psychotherapist who specializes in dealing with children and adolescents, I have heard countless stories about Visiting Day concerns prior to camp beginning. Many campers feel they have to become moderators and soothe a disappointed parent. Others rise to the occasion and try to become divorce mediators – which never happens. Still others feel like crawling under their bunks and skipping the day. Like Sara, just witnessing all the intact families having fun together makes so many campers experience their losses. They miss whichever parent isn’t present, or is present – but clearly not having fun. Sara told me she knew that sometimes she picked a fight with whichever parent came for visiting day just because she felt so confused and angry about the divorce. “Gypped” was how she put it, and guilty – even though she knew the divorce wasn’t her fault. She hated thinking that her mom was depressed when it was her “dad’s weekend.” It seemed so unfair to her.

Visiting Day for campers whose parents are divorced can be anything from a fun, easy event to the perfect storm to deal with all the unresolved issues. Often counselors themselves may be caught in the aftermath of their own family divorce and be unable to offer support.

Dr. Judy Rabinor, psychologist and author of her recent book, “Befriending Your Ex after Divorce: Making Life Better for You, Your Kids, and, Yes, Your Ex” offers strategies to help:

1. If your camp does not have it already, consider creating alternate visiting weekends (or days) for divorced parents. Become familiar with your campers’ family dynamics and make recommendations to parents that are likely to benefit everyone.
2. “Knowledge is Power”. Create an educational session or include one in orientation, highlighting the impact of visiting day on campers and younger staff from divorced families. All members of a camp community can benefit from a short presentation and/or interactive discussion recognizing that the aftermath of divorce leaves a tsunami of emotions: loss and grief, resentment and anger. Talking helps normalize difficult reactions.

3. Keep in mind: visiting day can be the perfect storm. While many campers respond to visiting day with vulnerability and homesickness, staff members need to be particularly attuned to campers who are vulnerable to feelings of grief and loss triggered once again by Visiting Day.
4. Consider offering discussion groups for vulnerable campers to help them feel like they have a place to vent, brainstorm and get support.

While these strategies are critically important, we have to remember that we also need the understanding and empathy that staff can show for campers who are going through such difficult times. This will help to make Visiting Day a more positive experience for all campers.

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